

The Tough Talk: Explaining War to Children in Military-Connected Homes

Talking to your kids about violence, terrorism, and war is always important, though it can be a challenging conversation for both parents and children. Many military-connected families I've worked with are surprised to learn that their children are often aware of current events and may feel anxious simply because someone in the household wears a uniform. Whether your family is preparing to deploy, is deployed, **or** is not scheduled for deployment at all, it's crucial to address these topics openly.

Children may not always understand the specifics of your role or whether you are in danger; they simply know you serve, and that alone can cause worry. They often encounter news of conflict at school, on social media, and from friends. Peers may ask them difficult questions about the military, prompting anxiety and uncertainty. Military-connected kids tend to be more attuned to world events than you might expect, often because their own family connection makes these issues feel personal. Even if your child isn't actively seeking out the news, they are likely to hear about it from others, especially at school or online. This heightened awareness can bring about anxiety, wondering, "Could it be my mom, dad, brother, or sister?" every time there's news of conflict.

I have personal experience with this: as a military-connected youth when my brother was stationed in Kuwait during the Iraq war, I often didn't fully understand the risks he faced or if he was safe. Each time there was breaking news, my anxiety spiked as I worried, "Maybe it was him." Fortunately, I had the support of my family, a school teacher, and a counselor to help me navigate these difficult emotions. Still, I often felt isolated at school, as none of my peers came from military families.

This is why it's so important to have honest, open conversations with your children about war and your role in the military. Whether your job is in combat arms, administration, or logistics, simply wearing the uniform can bring up a mix of anxiety, fear, anger, and frustration for your children. Yet, alongside those feelings, they also hold immense pride in your service.

Just as it is important for your safety and your unit's leadership to have tough conversations before deployment, it is important for you to have these conversations with your kids.

Here are some tips for having this conversation.

Time and Place: This conversation can't be rushed. Give yourself and kids plenty of time, a comfortable, safe space, with a favorite snack, teddy bear, etc.

Take the first step: It is important that adults take the lead in setting up the time and space. Your kids may not know how to ask because they are proud of your service and don't want to let you know they are anxious about it. Emotion, especially for kids, is

complicated, so it's best if you take the initiative. Also, start the conversation by asking your kids an open-ended question like "how do you think or feel about..." or "what have you heard or think about..." Let them guide the conversation.

Focus on the feeling or thoughts: It helps keep the conversation open and lets your kids talk without judgment, suggestions, attempts to fix the problem, or lecturing about the issue or feeling. Let them feel what they are feeling. Once you start to push back, they may close down.

You may be facing fears of your own, and some of these might be shared with your kid: You may be surprised by what kids share and question, so addressing your own personal fears may be necessary while building your own resiliency.

Reassure Kids: Explore issues together and maintain routines and structure. Avoid "what if" fears by offering reliable, honest information. It could help to set annual "Check-in talks" to keep the conversation going.

Here are some dos and don'ts for this conversation to further support the guidance I've shared above.

- Do give honest, truthful information. We are all inundated with social media and news programs, at home and at school. Be honest about what you do and don't know about how this impacts you and your family. Don't make promises you do not have control over.
- Don't lie, kids will figure it out. Be honest and open about your role in the military and what you do or don't know. Like you don't know when you'll return home or if you'll be deploying, etc.
- Do have age-appropriate conversations. The conversations you have with your 9-year-old and 13-year-old will look different. So, give each child some time and space to talk and ask their own questions. And you can gear your comment to that age group.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind when talking to your children of different ages.

For ages 2-4, kids think it is a very literal and immediate way. Abstract ideas like war are difficult to grasp, so your explanation needs to be concrete. Yes, to have the conversation with your 2-to 4-year-old, they may have questions and thoughts.

For early elementary ages 5-8, the conversation may be more concrete ideas, but they're curious and observant. So they may have many questions, and you may have to repeat yourself often. Encourage open dialogue, and they'll most likely want to revisit the topic later, so it's good to give them time again.

For Tweens Ages 9-12, kids start to gain an understanding of more complex ideas and are more connected to information in the world, especially with social media. Explore the complex idea with them, why and how, etc., validate all their feelings, and if they don't want to talk right away, give them the space, but let them know the offer is on the table to talk when they are ready.

For Teenagers Ages 13-18, Teenagers want independence but still need emotional support. So they may not bring up the topic easily, but it is important to take the first step, letting them know it's okay to talk when they are ready. Be a listener more than a lecturer; they will have their own idea about what is going on, and you may disagree on their point or view, but it is important to just listen. Invite their thoughts and respect their opinions even if they differ.

This is also a good opportunity for you to model resilience and help your kids build their own coping skills. Start by acknowledging that we all have emotions we can't simply get rid of, and discuss healthy ways to handle those feelings, especially when they become overwhelming. Techniques like box breathing or grounding exercises, such as listing three things you hear, smell, or see, can be helpful. Additionally, work together to identify three trusted adults—besides Mom and Dad—that your kids can turn to when their emotions feel overwhelming. This helps children understand that they have a supportive community around them.

Invite the conversation and listen actively—there is no perfect formula. Take the first step and be open to listening. Collaborate with your child's teacher and school to ensure consistent support. Remember, you are not alone; resources and a supportive community stand behind you and your family.

The Wisconsin National Guard Child and Youth Program offers resources and hosts day and overnight camps for military kids to connect and see that they are not alone.

For further support or to join the Child and Youth distribution list, contact johndaniel.w.engelhardt.ctr@army.mil (608-301-8246) or audrey.c.daigneult.ctr@army.mil (608-301-8448). Also have the 24/7 Family Assistance Hotline: 1-800-292-9464, press option 1.

Below is a list of references used for this article and resources to support your family.

Reference used for this article

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/militarykidsedguide.pdf>
<https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/talking-to-children-about-war.pdf>

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Children-About-Terrorism-And-War-087.aspx?scrllybrkr=6aaa4686

Resources for families

<https://arngcys.com/resources-for-families>

<https://dpi.wi.gov/military-children/military-children-resources>

<https://www.ourmilitarykids.org/apply/>

<https://military.tutor.com/home>

Counseling resource

<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/mental-health/confidential-counseling-for-youth-teens/>

Resources for education

<https://arngcys.com/resources-for-educators>

<https://dpi.wi.gov/military-children/military-children-resources>